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Remembering the Mao Era

Chloé Froissart, *La Chine et ses migrants. La conquête d'une citoyenneté* (China and its migrants: the conquest of a citizenship),

Presse Universitaires de Rennes, Rennes, 2013.

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- ¹ *La Chine et ses migrants. La conquête d'une citoyenneté* (China and its migrants: the conquest of a citizenship) is a major work, and along with Dorothy Solinger's *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China* (1999) constitutes the most complete and solidly documented scientific study of rural migrants in the People's Republic of China, of public policies concerning them, and of the dynamics of their relations with the Party-state. Based on a doctoral thesis, the book examines to what extent the enduring presence of migrant workers in post-Maoist China's urban areas, and the increasingly important role they play there, have led to a redefinition of criteria for social and political affiliations. In other words, how has the Party-State transformed itself so as to preserve the basis of its power while allowing the partial integration of a social group whose politico-institutional domination is



increasingly reflected in rising social, ideological, and economic contradictions? The perspective adopted is resolutely dynamic, perceiving social change as the result of interactions and conflicts between the state and society. The author, a senior lecturer at the University of Rennes 2, documents in detail not only the process of transformation of public policies relating to the management and integration of migrant populations in cities, but also migrants' practices, norms, and representations vis-à-vis the state and Chinese society.

- 2 The work is structured in five parts. In the first, Chloé Froissart offers a genealogy of the concept of citizenship and its mobilisation in the Chinese context. She contrasts the universalist conception inherited from the Enlightenment, by which “the citizen is an abstract subject of laws, implying civic, political, and legal equality of individuals,” with the Maoist one brimming with the notion of a special political and socio-economic determination of individuals' rights and duties (p. 45). As a framework for interpreting society-state relations, the author offers the dialectic of this dual vision of citizenship that continues to inform the Communist Party's actions. While Chapter 1 shows that Maoist era ideology and political struggles constitute an inescapable presupposition for interpreting the reach of the constitution and laws of the People's Republic of China, Chapter 2 documents the role and effects of the “residency permit” (*hukou*) administrative system that has defined individual-state relations since the 1950s, establishing a system of statuses linked to one's position in the productive system, local inscription, and political status, and invalidating “the apparent universality of Chinese laws” (pp. 45-46).
- 3 The second and third parts form the heart of the book and are also the most impressive in terms of explanations and the richness of sources documented. In Part 2, Froissart highlights the confluence of institutional, economic, political, and sociological factors that help explain the exodus towards the cities from the 1980s until the early part of the past decade, while also showing how the migrant worker category became institutionalised. Focusing on the way in which public policies regarding migrant workers are applied in Chengdu, a city that has not been the focus of much academic study but has been at the forefront of public policies of integration aimed at migrants, she describes in great detail how the combination of myriad bureaucratic rules and procedures inherited from the planned economy days and covering accommodation, jobs, births, social security, and education contribute to fashioning the conditions for migrant workers' presence and their “second class citizen” status. The “control” and “management” logic that governs an ethic of public service for migrants appears clearly. But what chapters 4 and 5 also bring out is the production, through the subtle interpretation by state actors of these control procedures regarding the stay and employment of rural workers in cities, of a cheap and flexible labour force servicing both the formal and informal economy. In fact, the strong trend towards marketisation of administrative services since the 1990s in respect of migrant workers' residence and jobs put them in an ambiguous legal and procedural situation, given that they risk never being able to conform to the totality of such rules. As Froissart stresses, having papers in order does not guarantee escape from arbitrary treatment on a daily basis (p. 116). Such “routine repression” in urban areas, combined with the marketisation of labour and deregulation of work regimes, is crucial to the understanding of economic reform policies. Thus the logic of state control and its effects (externalisation) meeting

the needs of the market (or capitalism) in terms of the cost of labour production and reproduction becomes clear.

- 4 The daily experience of various indignities and the precariousness of existence produced by social control procedures in urban areas – modalities of repression that vary according to the place, time, and people concerned – is central to understanding the modalities of relations between migrant workers and the state as well as their conceptions of the state, its agents, and the law. Thus, in Chapter 6, the author specifies that while residency and migration are marked with a provisional seal, it is “above all because the provisional feeling is fed by the [institutionally produced] precariousness of life in the city” (p. 166). The chapter deals in a nuanced manner with the issue of migrant workers’ internalising their unequal status, the author stressing that the diversity of their experiences and profiles renders any generalisation risky in this regard. She also shows how the “weakness of institutional mediation” in social conflicts and respect for the law constitutes an obstacle to migrants’ recognition of their rights (pp. 179, 181).
- 5 Part 3 (chapters 7 and 8) focuses on the social, political, ideological, and economic factors that led to the urban integration of migrant workers at the start of the last decade. Froissart documents how in the decade beginning with the early 1990s, Chinese intellectual elites structured a number of observations (the major increase in the volume of migration and expansion of villagers’ communities inside cities, the exponential rise in urban crime and inequality, etc.) via a stack of reports (sponsored by public authorities, research publications, etc.) inherited from the migration policies of the planned economy era. The author applies original insights to the paradigm shift, in the early 2000s, towards “a new way of conceiving order as well as of the costs and benefits linked to migration” (p. 226), meaning the authorities’ realisation of the need to adapt public policies regarding management of migrant populations in cities so as to go beyond the “management and control” logic by providing “services (*fuwu*) to migrant workers” and somehow restoring their faith in the Party-state (p. 209). Thus, in Chapter 8, Froissart shows how Chinese scholars have contributed to this paradigm shift and the emergence of a discourse around citizenship. She describes the passage from a “dogmatic sociology” to an “empirical sociology,” stressing that sociological knowledge thereafter concerning migrants, their conditions, and their experiences is increasingly articulated around a questioning of China’s socioeconomic development, especially a critique of the reforms ushered in under Jiang Zemin’s rule between 1993 and 2002. However, it should be noted that there is another dogmatic dimension to at least part of this “empirical sociology,” no longer Marxist-Leninist but idealising the virtues of market economy. Chapter 8 also narrates how in the first half of the last decade, an increasing number and diversity of social actors (academics, journalists, writers, NGO activists, and artists) once again mobilised in favour of protecting migrant workers’ rights, a discourse approved by new political priorities developed at the top of the Party-state (the 16th CCP Congress in 2002 and Hu Jintao’s call for “putting people first”– *yi ren wei ben* – to put greater emphasis on laws and respect for rights and to raise farmers’ revenues, etc.). Once considered an impediment to modernisation, migrant workers were transformed into “new heroes who sacrifice themselves for the motherland, for others, and for the common good” (p. 244). It is interesting to note that right from the early 1990s, in the special economic zones of the Pearl River Delta and especially Shenzhen, the figure of the migrant worker was the subject of intense ideological investment on both the official and popular levels. From the second half of

the 1990s, migrant workers were even favourably compared with state enterprise workers and cited for their exemplary values of sacrifice, autonomy, and competitive spirit. As for the emergence of a new discourse around migrant workers starting from early in the last decade, Froissart lays stress on both the overall consensual dimension and the often paternalistic tone of this discourse, which includes “patriotic” tinges but also political, legal, and ethical criticism of the system of domination (p. 248).

- 6 In Part 4, the author shows how the paradigm shift in the management of migrants in cities occurs at the local level. In particular she examines reforms of the *hukou* system, social security, and education of migrants in Chengdu. As for social security, and as regards *hukou* reform, status inequalities are compounded by socioeconomic ones, leading to a “pyramidal stratification within the migrant category between the small elite integrated into the urban residents’ social regime as well as those who are covered by a regime specific to migrants, and the great majority who have no means of social security whatsoever” (p. 278).
- 7 Part 5 seeks to understand the influence that the “rights defence movement” (*weiquan yundong*) has had on the Chinese regime. Relying on interviews in Beijing, Chengdu, and Shenzhen with several more-or-less formal social organisations, the author documents both the extent and limits of actions by migrant workers themselves and by various other actors and social groups (NGO activists, mutual help networks, experts, etc.) on administrative measures and on the Party-state’s policies. In the book’s conclusion, Froissart summarises this far from univocal or definitive dialectic of social and political change, stating that such actions and mobilisations in support of migrants’ rights “[...] contribute as much to deterring migrants’ empowerment as a social group and the politicisation of their demands as to the promotion of their rights and keeping their place in society” (p. 376).
- 8 Chapter 11 is entirely devoted to the Sun Zhigang incident,¹ analysed as a revealing event for “the affirmation of a Chinese citizenship, in conscience and in act” and as establishing a “new dissenting paradigm to the extent that it [the incident] stands as a struggle for recognition of rights by the use of such rights [...]”(p. 328). The last chapter studies the nature of the “rights defence movement” with an in-depth examination of the role of Chinese “NGOs” in the movement, as well as their relations and actions in relation to the Party.
- 9 The book is replete with well referenced first-hand official source material (state council documents, municipal rules, etc.), as well as the author’s interviews and ethnographic observations between 2002 and 2007, especially in Chengdu, Shenzhen, and Beijing. Reference to scientific sources and works of political sociology and the sociology of migration allow comparisons between the Chinese case and migratory or integration processes in France and elsewhere in the world.
- 10 The author shows in detail throughout the book how much the issues raised by migrants’ presence in cities are central political issues redefining the role of the state and its relations with different categories in society, modalities of government, and politico-ideological bases. Above all, while the book shows how diverse forms of “legitimate resistance” by migrants and the major restructuring of social space have pushed the Party-state to gradually extend urban citizenship to partially include migrant workers, it also offers a deep exploration of transformations of governance in a reforming China. In this, it constitutes a major contribution to understanding and defining the nature of the authoritarian regime in post-Maoist China. Froissart casts

light on a central dimension of the Party-state's resilience – a protean capacity to integrate and channel social demands and blur the borders between state and civil society, while retaining the margin of politico-institutional arrangements that govern the hierarchic balance between the state and different categories of the population, and which were at the heart of post-Maoist political economy. Froissart shows how, for instance, the modalities of social control of migration are redeployed even while gradually integrating the logic of services for migrants. It may be noted that it is not the Party-state alone that displays this capacity for mutation and redeployment; enterprises likewise have demonstrated and continue to prove their ability to adapt to new constraints linked to the paradigm shift in policies towards migrant workers, as for instance in the domain of labour legislation, where they have displayed great inventiveness to intensify exploitation (Chris King-Chi Kan, *The Challenge of Labour in China. Strikes and the Changing Labour Regime in Global Factories*, Routledge, 2010). Perhaps the concepts of market economy and capitalism could have been further theorised and interrogated. On this note, a detailed discussion of works such those by Pun Ngai, Yan Hairong, and Lee Ching-Kwan (*Against the Law*) would have opened interesting paths in the matter of links between capitalism and the post-Maoist regime.

- 11 This minor flaw takes nothing away from the book's accomplishments. With its solid theoretical foundation, empirical richness, and lucid argumentation, this study is bound to become an essential French reference work on the transformation of the dynamic of relations between the Party-State and migrant workers. It is of interest to political and social science scholars as well as to teachers and students of contemporary China.

NOTES

1. Sun Zhigang, a young graphic designer of rural origin, suffered beatings and injuries and was found dead in April 2003 in a Custody & Repatriation Centre in Guangzhou after having been arrested the previous month for lacking identity papers and a temporary residence permit. The circumstances of his death led to unprecedented social mobilisation resulting in the abolition of such centres by June that year. The fact that Sun was a university graduate made a major impression on the public, especially in urban areas, in that their ability to identify with him surmounted the usual urban-rural divide (p. 325).

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